

The IUPUI Psychology Department's Undergraduate Curriculum

Most students believe they understand their curriculum if they know what courses to take and when to take them. Although it is certainly important to know the answers to these questions, psychology majors should also be acutely aware of the answers to three other questions: Why should I take these courses? How will these courses change me? Who can I become as a result of successfully completing these courses? The point of this paper is to help you, as a prospective or current psychology major, to understand that your curriculum is not just a list of courses you must complete to receive a degree; it is a coherent set of transformational experiences carefully designed to provide you with the opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and characteristics you will need to become the person you aspire to be.

The word curriculum is derived from the Latin word *currere*, which means “to race” (Costello, 1993, p. 340). In modern English, curriculum means “a group of related courses, often in a special field of study” (Costello, 1993, p. 340). The topic of this paper is the IUPUI Psychology Department’s undergraduate curriculum, which is defined as the set of psychology courses you must complete to earn a BA or BS in psychology. The psychology faculty has carefully crafted this particular course of study over the past three decades to enable psychology majors to accomplish a set of crucial goals. Many students take the original Latin derivation too literally by viewing their curriculum as a race they must rush through as quickly as possible so they can graduate in the shortest period of time. If the goal of a college education were to finish it as quickly as possible, then this would be an appropriate strategy. But that is not its goal. The goal of a college education is to prepare a person to lead a fulfilling personal, social, and professional life after graduation. This paper is an attempt to bring your attention to this fundamental discrepancy by explaining how your curriculum can help you achieve your post-baccalaureate aspirations (i.e., the attainment of admission into graduate school, a satisfying career, and/or a fulfilling personal life). If you read it carefully and comprehend it fully, it will help you become more ‘mindful’ (Langer, 1989) of the purpose and nature of the psychology courses you are required to take so you can engage in these courses in an active, thoughtful, and goal-oriented manner, rather than simply attempting to “get them out of the way” as quickly and mindlessly as possible. In other words, it will help you to experience a greater sense of control over your undergraduate education, and the benefits of a greater sense of psychological control have been empirically proven (Rodin & Langer, 1977).

The Psychology Department’s Undergraduate Committee has identified the seven following student-learning outcomes (SLOs) that its majors will accomplish if they take full advantage of the opportunities their curriculum provides. The development of this combination of SLOs is congruent with the fundamental goal of education in psychology, which is “to teach students to think as scientists about behavior” (Brewer, 1993, p. 169).

1. Content of Psychology → Students will show familiarity with the major concepts, theories, findings, and history of psychology.
2. Research in Psychology → Students will understand and use psychological research methods (i.e., design, data analysis, and interpretation).
3. Application of Psychology → Students will understand and generate applications of psychology to individual, social, and organizational issues.
4. Ethics in Psychology → Students will understand and abide by the ethics of psychology, including those encouraging the recognition, understanding, and respect for socio-cultural complexity and international diversity.
5. Personal Development, Collaboration, and Career Planning → Students will understand themselves, acquire effective collaboration skills, and develop realistic ideas about how to pursue careers in psychology and related fields.
6. Communication Skills, Information Competence, and Technological Proficiency → Students will write and speak effectively, demonstrate information competence, and use technology successfully.
7. Critical and Creative Thinking and Problem Solving → Students will use critical and creative thinking in the scientific approach to problem solving.

The attainment of these SLOs is based on the acquisition and demonstration of the fundamental knowledge and skills underlying IUPUI's Principles of Undergraduate Learning that all undergraduates strive to achieve. The substance and depth of the first five SLOs distinguish psychology majors from their peers who major in other disciplines. The psychology curriculum is divided into five sets of courses, and the successful completion of each of these sets serves to enable psychology majors to develop one or more of the department's SLOs. The remainder of this paper will explain how they do so.

Introductory Courses

The purposes of introductory courses are to introduce you to the content, methods, and applications of modern psychology; to help you become familiar with the department's faculty, organizations, resources, and programs; and to help you discover and explore the career opportunities an undergraduate education in psychology can provide. There are three introductory courses: B103 Orientation to a Major in Psychology, B104 Introduction to Psychology as a Social Science, and B105 Introduction to Psychology as a Biological Science. The successful completion of B103 enables you to better understand your strengths, weakness, and values and to identify, clarify, and create a plan to accomplish your post-baccalaureate goals. Many students choose psychology as their major before they fully comprehend its nature (e.g., that it is a research-based science). B103 has been designed specifically to insure that you are fully aware of the nature of your major and what you can do with it after graduation). In B103 you will begin to strengthen the written and oral communication skills you will need in all your remaining psychology courses.

B104 and B105 introduce you to the complete spectrum of areas of specialization that exist within psychology. B104 covers topics that represent the social science side of psychology (i.e., personality, lifespan development, social psychology, abnormal psychology, psychotherapy, intelligence, and industrial-organizational psychology). B105 covers topics that represent the biological science side of psychology (i.e., behavioral neuroscience, motivation, emotion, memory, sensation, perception, cognition, language, and consciousness). Both courses cover learning, psychological research methods, and the history of psychology because of the crucial importance of these topics for all psychologists. The successful completion of the three introductory courses paves the way for you to continue your study of psychology with a fundamental awareness of its basic principles, concepts, theories, specializations, methods, and applications and with an understanding of how a psychology major can prepare you for your future. Another important outcome of the successful completion of these introductory courses is that it will allow you to make informed decisions when you select your subsequent psychology courses.

Methods Courses

The purpose of methods courses is to provide you with opportunities to learn and apply the methods used by psychologists during their scientific investigations of behavior and mental processes. These courses encourage critical and creative thinking during the scientific approach to problem solving because they require you to provide plausible explanations for psychological observations, comprehend and critique the findings of previous research, produce novel hypotheses derived from the existing psychological literature, create ethical research designs to test these hypotheses, and provide logical explanations for the results of your research. You will also demonstrate information competence (as you perform bibliographic searches) and use technology successfully (as you use computer software to analyze the data you collect).

There are two required methods courses: B305 Statistics and B311 Introductory Laboratory in Psychology. B305 focuses on the fundamentals of statistical analysis, which enable you to organize and summarize data (descriptive statistics) and to interpret and draw conclusions from data (inferential statistics). B311 requires and builds upon the statistical knowledge gained in B305 as it introduces you to experimental methods in psychology, the ethics of research, and experimental report writing. The successful completion of these two courses is crucial to the further success of a psychology major. Those students who aspire to graduate school will use the skills they acquire in these courses to design and perform the research projects that will serve as evidence to graduate admissions committees of their ability to conduct themselves as scientific psychologists. Those who do not use this knowledge to perform research will employ it to understand and evaluate the research of others. As you progress from your introductory courses to your more advanced courses, you will be required to read, comprehend, and critique original psychological research (i.e., primary sources such as articles in professional journals) rather than learning from secondary sources such as textbooks in which the authors have done all the interpreting and critiquing

for you. If you have not mastered the vocabulary and techniques from your methods courses—and not carried it with you into your core courses—the results section of a journal article will appear to you as if it had been written in an alien language from a planet outside our galaxy.

Core Courses

The purpose of core courses is to provide you with a broad and deep exposure to the main content areas that define the discipline of psychology. You will select six courses from a set of twelve that represent the biological and the social science of psychology, including both basic principles and applied areas. These twelve courses are B307 Tests and Measurement, B310 Life Span Development, B320 Behavioral Neuroscience, B334 Perception, B340 Cognition, B344 Learning, B356 Motivation, B358 Industrial/Organizational Psychology, B370 Social Psychology, B380 Abnormal Psychology, B398 Brain Mechanisms of Behavior, and B424 Theories of Personality. I encourage you to choose a coherent set of core courses that will provide you with the knowledge and skills you will need to achieve your post-baccalaureate aspirations. Suppose you are preparing to become a school psychologist whose job will be to test the cognitive capabilities of children in order to determine if their ability to learn falls within the normal range. In this case, B307, B310, B340, B344, and B380 would provide an excellent foundation. The addition of B320—which provides a basic knowledge of how the anatomy and physiology of the nervous system controls behavior and mental processes—would enable you to identify and understand the effects of the drugs that your young clients may be taking either legally (e.g., Ritalin or Prozac) or illegally (e.g., alcohol or marijuana). No matter which career you hope to pursue, the core courses you take will enable you to understand how psychology can be applied to a wide variety of individual, social, and organizational issues and encourage you to recognize, understand, and respect socio-cultural complexity and international diversity.

Specialization Courses

The purpose of specialization courses is to provide you with an opportunity to focus your studies in a particular area of psychology by choosing and completing two 300-level or above psychology classes. Continuing our school psychologist plan from the preceding section, you could build on the knowledge you gained in B310 by taking B360 Child and Adolescent Psychology and become even more knowledgeable about the effects of drugs after completing B320 by taking B394 Drugs and Behavior. The addition of these courses to your already impressive set of core courses would help to successfully set you apart from other graduate school applicants. This is becoming increasingly important because of the huge number of psychology majors who graduate each year in the United States with a bachelor's degree (approximately 74,000 in 2001). A unique feature of IUPUI's psychology curriculum is the option to earn a certificate of completion in one of the following four areas of concentration: clinical rehabilitation psychology, behavioral neuroscience, industrial/organizational psychology, or the psychobiology of addictions. You must complete a set of core, specialization, and capstone courses described in the table on page 524 of the *2002-2004 IUPUI Campus Bulletin* to earn one of these certificates. Courses you could take to satisfy this requirement include B322 Introduction to Clinical Rehabilitation Psychology, B365 Stress and Health, B366 Concepts and Applications in Organizational Psychology, B367 Concepts and Applications in Personnel Psychology, B376 The Psychology of Women, B382 Practicum in Community Psychology, B386 Introduction to Counseling, B396 Alcohol, Alcoholism, and Drug Abuse, B420 Humanistic Psychology, and B422 Professional Practice.

Capstone Courses

In architecture, a capstone is the top-most stone that completes a building. In an academic context, a capstone is the final class that completes a psychology major's curriculum. The purpose of capstone classes is to provide students with an opportunity "to demonstrate comprehensive learning in their major through some type of product or performance" (Palomba & Banta, 1999, p. 124). In other words, a capstone is a class in which senior psychology majors are required to pull together what they have learned in their previous classes and use this integrating experience to demonstrate they are capable of doing what they should be able to do as they graduate from the program (i.e., the department's SLOs). This process serves a dual purpose. It will provide you with a final opportunity to practice and demonstrate the skills you will need to succeed after graduation on the job or in graduate school. It also provides the Psychology Department with a final opportunity to assess whether or not we have been successful in our mission to produce competent psychology majors and to use the results of this assessment to improve our curriculum for future psychology majors.

Most psychology departments offer only one capstone class, and many offer no capstone at all. The IUPUI Psychology Department offers you three types of capstone courses. If you are pursuing a BA degree, then you may complete a capstone laboratory research project, a capstone practicum, or a capstone seminar. If you are pursuing a BS degree, you must complete a capstone laboratory.

- A capstone laboratory offers you the opportunity to design, perform, analyze, and report an empirical research project on a topic of your choosing and can be conducted (a) in a laboratory class dedicated to the study of a particular sub-discipline of psychology (e.g., social, developmental, or personality psychology), (b) in an individual research class, or (c) in an honors research class. The classes that will satisfy this requirement are B423 Capstone Laboratory in Physiological Psychology, B425 Capstone Laboratory in Personality, B431 Capstone Laboratory in Sensation and Perception, B445 Capstone Laboratory in Learning, B457 Capstone Laboratory in Motivation, B461 Capstone Laboratory in Developmental Psychology, B471 Capstone Laboratory in Social Psychology, B497 Capstone Individual Research, and B499 Capstone Honors Research.
- A capstone practicum allows you to apply what you have learned about a particular sub-discipline of psychology (e.g., industrial/organizational or clinical rehabilitation psychology) in a workplace or clinical setting. The classes that will satisfy this requirement are B462 Capstone Practicum in Industrial Psychology and B482 Capstone Practicum in Clinical Rehabilitation Psychology.
- A capstone seminar provides you with opportunities to (a) perform an in-depth examination of a sub-discipline of psychology in which you have an occupational interest, (b) engage in a collaborative research project, and (c) create a professional planning portfolio designed to facilitate your transition to life after college (i.e., employment or graduate school). The class that will satisfy this requirement is B454 Capstone Seminar in Psychology.

The purpose of this paper has been to provide you with a clear understanding of the rationale behind the IUPUI Psychology Department's undergraduate curriculum. You can approach your undergraduate education as a psychology major in a more active and purposeful manner once you understand why the department created its curriculum, how you can accomplish its SLOs, and who you can become as a result of their accomplishment. Successful undergraduate educations take place when well-qualified faculty lead well-informed students through a well-planned curriculum. The IUPUI Psychology Department possesses a well-qualified faculty and a well-planned curriculum. I hope this paper has transformed you into a well-informed student.

References

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